

Using NLP to Create & Sustain Couples Part I

By Dr. Richard Bolstad

One of the most enjoyable tasks for me as an NLP Practitioner is enabling people to create and enjoy one to one intimate relationships. In talking to other Practitioners, I sometimes get the sense that they dread working with couples. A few simple guidelines can solve this.

Sadly, very little in NLP prepares us to work with couples, despite two early NLP books being focused on the field (*Solutions* by Leslie Cameron Bandler, and *Changing With Families* by Richard Bandler, John Grinder and Virginia Satir). Bandler and Grinder's collaboration with Satir was one of NLP's big "unfinished symphonies." This essay is intended only to add a couple of bars to *Changing With Families*, which is without doubt the clearest guide to couples counseling ever written.

A) Helping People Find "Somebody to Love"

Finding an intimate partner or spouse is one of the most dramatic life challenges most people confront. It has become increasingly hard as all the 19th century social courting rituals have been stripped away from us. Stifling they were; but they also gave a clear "how to" guide to the perplexed. In working with individuals to assist them to join as a couple, I'm actually re-inventing this guide.

Typically the person comes to see me complaining that they want to be in a long-term loving relationship. They have identified the gender and a few other characteristics of their desired life mate, but such people are rare as hen's teeth, and they have had a few bad experiences settling for less than the ideal. It's getting harder to find anyone at all, and they are convinced that time is running out.

I have a sequence which I run through with the person which (so far) invariably places them "at cause" (i.e. in charge) of their achieving this goal. In one case, for example, a woman came to see me saying that her "biological clock" was "ticking," and she had to begin within two years or so if she ever wanted to have children. She had been married before, and her husband had died suddenly.

Everyone she had approached to begin a relationship had left her suddenly, or made it clear that long term commitment and children were out of the question. When I asked her to look into the future and imagine what it would be like to be in such a relationship, she immediately reported that the image seemed unreal and impossible. We spent one session. A month later she was married and pregnant. She is now, three years later, happily married with two children.

There is a structure to this achievement. It is not dependent on "luck." Here's how I assist people to refine that structure.

Resourceful State

I begin with my own resourceful state. I myself am currently living happily in a relationship of 14 years duration. I believe very deeply that this relationship gives me more than any other relationship could; certainly far more than I ever "expected". And yet, I also believe that if it ended tomorrow, I could, if I chose, establish another such relationship within a short period of time. If you doubt that you could do the same, then this is the first reframe you need before guiding someone else to find love. Obviously, your beliefs are unconsciously conveyed to your client.

Establish Rapport

Before intervening in another person's belief system, I listen to their story and acknowledge the reality of their dilemma. Yes, there are fewer people "like them" than not like them. Yes, it may be hard to find men who want commitment, or women who are willing to be responsible for their lives, or whatever. As we'll discover later, though, this has nothing to do with success in finding a partner. It does not explain how some people find what they want and others do not.

Specify the outcome

I elicit the person's values for a relationship. (See *Time Line Therapy and The Basis of Personality* by Tad James and Wyatt Woodsmall). If any of their first four values are "away from" (e.g. "not being cheated on," "being able to resolve conflicts") I point out that such values indicate that they've had less than satisfying previous relationships where that value wasn't met. I use Time Line Therapy™ to clear that distress.

I also check the ecology of being in a relationship. Firstly, what will they be giving up by being in such a relationship (e.g. their ability to make unnegotiated and spontaneous changes of residence). Secondly, what risks will they be taking on by taking on a relationship? No relationship is risk free. The other person might leave them; they might change in some way, they might later discover something about the first person that they don't approve of.

Often, when I check the ecology of the "ideal relationship," the person says that it's fine; they'd be happy with that in every way. But all relationships are in process; the possibility of change is part of the deal.

So I check "Can you live with the possibility of change. Is it worth having this ideal, knowing that it will always be a moment-by-moment discovery?"

To congruently desire a relationship, the person need not accept all those changes; but they need to be willing to live with the uncertainty of change. When you're by yourself you hold all the cards. In a couple, your partner also has a deal. If there is any problem with setting a congruent goal, I use Time Line Therapy™ or Parts Integration to resolve it.

Open Up Their Model of the World

Once the person has a congruent goal, we're ready to discover how they have been creating a reality where that goal didn't occur. This requires eliciting certain strategies from the person:

A) Their strategy for knowing they are loved. This is basically the one step strategy whose elicitation is described by Tony Robbins in *Unlimited Power* Chapter 8.

B) Their strategy for feeling love. Use a similar process to get them to associate back into a time when they felt love, and find out how they did it. What did they use as a cue to allow themselves to "fall in love?" This strategy has often been disabled after a subsequent traumatic event (the person has stopped themselves ever run-fling it, because last time it led to a situation where they got hurt) If you find this time, again, run Time Line Therapy™ on it.

C) Their strategy for knowing that someone is attracted to them. The truth is, people are getting attracted to them every so often in their life. Somehow they are not noticing it. Find out how they did notice it at a previous time, and check if they are aware that it's still happening. "Attracted" to them is different from "love." I usually use a New Zealand colloquialism, "How do you know if someone has the hots for you?" to make the difference clear.

D) Their strategy for getting attracted to (read "getting the hots for") someone else. Of course, most people are going to tell you that it's just magic. That's the problem! I ask them, if you were blind could you still do it? If you were deaf could you still do it? If you were unable to feel touch from the neck down could you still do it? If you had no smell could you still do it? I want them to reconnect with the sensory experience of sexual desire. The person you are working with is a mammal. They have an hormonal system which is designed to create craving. The opportunities are so frequent that the only way they haven't been doing it is by keeping it out of awareness.

You may wonder; why find out about sexual desire when what the person wants is love? In my opinion, love is the sun that nurtures the growth of intimacy, but desire/ attraction is the juice, the fertilizer. People often fantasize that their relationships grow on air. I find that when I associate them into relationships that they were willing to invest energy in, attraction is real significant! Just eliciting these strategies tends to reactivate them.

Often I will play with the person as they report a patently unsuccessful strategy, using the pattern called by Tad James the Logical Levels of Therapy:

"You mean you can only know that someone is attracted to you if they tell you that in words. So if I was filling in for you, and I see this person who I get the hots for, and they're looking at me, breathing twice as fast as usual, smiling and making constant eye contact, and talking excitedly with me about things that turn them on, I have to tell myself that they're probably not interested?")

At this stage, then, I do a lot of reframing. For example, we joke together about how vast the range of choices there are for them, and how careful they must have to be not to notice them.

Lead the Person to Create Their Desired Outcome

Obviously, at times I will do more than just elicit these strategies. At times, the person will choose to change them. Some people know how to run their attraction strategies but not their love strategies. That produces great sex, but empty relationships. Some people run their love strategies but not their attraction ones. That produces great friendships. Some people have the two strategies set up so that where they feel love, they cannot feel attraction, and vice versa.

The person will say, "I have lots of great friends whom I could live with, but they don't turn me on. Those kind of people feel too much like my brother/sister. What turns me on is. . . but I don't want to live with that sort of person!" This is a great issue for Parts Integration or Time Line Therapy™. At times I will take their attraction strategy, anchor it, and transfer it to the type of person they would like to have a relationship with.

There is one more kind of strategy that's crucial for successfully beginning a relationship. It's the strategy for initiating an interaction with someone you're attracted to. It involves knowing how to send them increasingly strong non-verbal cues of interest (whereas the person who is unsuccessful has often been sending cues of avoidance to the very people they're attracted to). It involves verbally expressing interest in a way that is socially appropriate (which is different in different social groups, and different depending on sexual orientation). It involves having a next comment ready to say if the other person expresses interest back, and a second option for if they express disinterest.

As I explore and rehearse the person through this strategy, more issues often come out of the closet. These include fear of rejection (it's sometimes easier to pretend there aren't any potential partners out there, i.e., "I don't want them"- rather than acknowledge "they may not want me"). These are issues for Time Line Therapy™. Also, as I rehearse the person through a successful strategy, I use any anchors that may give the necessary propulsion (see Richard Bandler's video *Shyness* for a demonstration.)

Verify the Change

Before the person leaves the session, I like to check that they feel different about the whole process now. I have them notice how their old beliefs may seem amusing now, and how their new strategies are almost irresistible.

Exit - future pace and ecology check

Finally, I rehearse them through the kind of situations they are aiming to create. Of course they are occasionally going to move through experiences of "rejection."

Every such experience provides more practice with their skills, and reminds them that when they get a "yes" they have really succeeded.

Finally, love and attraction are two of the three ingredients, which I consider necessary for a relationship. The third is sensory specific, feedback-based communication (I suspect that this is the crucial denormalisation of "commitment"). A relationship is not a "thing" that the person buys "complete". It is a process. There is no perfect relationship, because that would suggest a terminated process. Beliefs about this are another key issue to be resolved to future pace into success.

B) Helping Couples Relate

The process of NLP based therapy with couples involves two levels of work. On one level, there are a series of educational activities, which I do as a therapist. This forms some of the official "content" that we discuss in our sessions. There are six key areas, which I remember with the acronym FAMILY.

Frame the Outcome Each Session

Usually I begin by pointing out that a decision to seek couples counseling is in itself an expression of commitment to some sort of relationship, and I ask what prompted the two people to come. I listen to each person's description in turn (insisting on that happening if necessary), build rapport with each individually, and check what each person's outcome is. If one person has "no outcome" (i.e. claims to be happy with things as they are) I ask, "What will you need to be doing differently so that you don't end up agreeing to come back?"

In terms of setting an outcome, I mainly want to know, "Do both of you want to preserve this relationship, or just one of you, or neither of you?" I realize that either person may be ambivalent, but I want an agreement from both people that the goal of the session is to preserve the relationship or I will treat the session as "not a couple counseling session."

In the latter case I'm just working with two individuals helping them to resolve conflicts, to each of their satisfaction (maybe even by finding ways to separate). We all need to be clear which outcome is being agreed to. The rest of this model assumes that our goal is to enhance the relationship.

Anchoring

I explain the process of anchoring, and identify ways in which this may have been working in the relationship. Often, people in conflict have used most of their time together to try and resolve the conflicts, and the sight/sound/ touch of their partner is now associated with conflict. They feel bad when they see or hear or touch each other. To re-anchor positive states, I have each of them close their eyes and associate back into a time when they felt congruently good about the other person (e.g. soon after they first met).

I then have them open their eyes and notice that this is the same person! This is a process Satir used while "taking a family history". I also teach the couple how to use anchors effectively (e.g., don't fight in the bedroom; spend time together without arguing).

Metaprograms and Values

I formally elicit each of their values for a relationship, and for life; or give them this as a home task to do (separately, and perhaps asking them to guess what they think the other person's values are; so they get the idea that they have separate values). I discuss the differences, and identify the similarities. I usually give them a Myers Briggs style personality questionnaire and a questionnaire about their favored sensory representational system.

I never assume the results of these questionnaires are "true" to their actual behavior of course. I make my own decisions about what is happening, and help the two of them to notice metaprogram and sensory preference differences in the session. This is usually a moving experience, as they discover that one person does not have to be framed as "wrong;" they may just be "different." I teach them how to utilize each other's style, and how to build rapport with that style.

Individual Therapy

This may involve a session with each person to clear negative anchors using Time Line Therapy™ and Parts Integration, and to similarly heal any older distress about relationships. It is also a useful way to clarify each person's outcomes. I arrange that each session is confidential, and ask permission before raising issues from an individual session in the couple session. Some therapists prefer to have another therapist see each individual. There are advantages to each method.

Love and Attraction Strategies

I elicit each of the four strategies described in the previous section (how do you know you're loved?: how do you get to love someone?: how do you know someone is attracted to you?: how do you get attracted to someone?). I then teach each of them how to fulfill the other person's strategies congruently.

I get their agreement to utilize some simple arrangements as they communicate. These include "I" messages to express their own intentions and responses, reflective listening (verbal feedback) to check the accuracy of their perceptions, and win-win conflict resolution based on chunking up to shared descriptions of the outcome and chunking down to mutually acceptable solutions.

While I do actually coach people in these processes, more significantly, we discover them as we perform the "real" task of couples therapy, which is to intervene in closed communication loops as they occur in the session.

Bibliography

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